

## Southern Hospitality

### Great ocean fishing highlights Gulf trip

By Dick Ellis



After a long fight and a quick introduction into handling a 14 foot rod and net, Scott Heitman of New Berlin lands another great-tasting Florida sheepshead on the rocks of St. George Island. (Ellis)



With the Gulf of Mexico as a backdrop, Scott Heitman of New Berlin holds two of a dozen Florida sheepshead taken that morning from the rocks of St. George Island. Pompano, whiting, shark, and a variety of other species are also available to shore and surf fishermen. (Ellis)

Nothing to it, Wisconsinite Scott Heitman. Balance the rocks of St. George Island without tumbling into the Gulf of Mexico. Manipulate a 14 foot long crappie pole with a hard-fighting, striped Florida sheepshead on the line that just crushed your fiddler crab. Bend to net the fish if you can bring it close enough at all with that monster rod seriously challenging just how far a shore angler can reach. Ignore the reporter laughing and taking photos. Remember, he looked way worse than you fighting his inaugural sheepshead minutes before.

Nice job. Under the tutelage of retired educator Dick Henske of Manitowish Waters now wintering on St. George Island, another

one bites the dust. Another sheepshead that in no way, shape or taste resembles the Wisconsin sheepshead of home.

Lori and Taylor and I left for spring break with our good friends Scott and Robin Heitman and their daughter Savannah intent on a shore fishing vacation out of Gulf Shores on the panhandle of Florida, moving east at midweek to visit the newly purchased Panama City Beach home being prepared for weekly rental by New London Wisconsin natives Dave and Linda Becker, and east again to target sheepshead at the winter home of Lori's parents; Dick and Mariel Henske on St. George Island. Actually, Scott and I were intent on fishing with the occasional interruptions necessary to scare Bayou boys away

from 16 year old daughters. Our wives and daughters were intent only in turning slowly in the sun over seven days like four rotisserie chickens.

We landed after a 20 hour drive from southeast Wisconsin on Gulf Shores near Pensacola. Scott and I purchased seven day Florida non-resident fishing license for \$30.00, shrimp and sand fleas for bait and a dose of good advice from the locals. The water was unseasonably cold and despite our holding vigil for four hours over three days on the white beaches of the Gulf, our primary targets of pompano and whiting had not migrated in yet in high numbers and we didn't score.

After visiting Wisconsin friends Dave

and Linda Becker as they prepared their new gulf home in Panama City Beach, our trip continued east on the panhandle to St. George Island, where Lori's parents, retired educators, have resided for two months each winter over the past decade. All Badgers with an eye on the upcoming Florida spring vacation should take note; hot fun in the Deep South with rod and reel has no age restrictions.

"This is northern Florida in the upper panhandle where it's less expensive and they advertise great beaches, no high rises, no stop signs," said Henske. "On the internet you'll find St. George Island and Mexico Beach near Apalachicola 100 miles south of Tallahassee."

We rented an off-shore home with Lori's sister and brother-in-law Kris and Doug Culaz and their small children, Carter and Julia. Dick and Mariel annually rent a home on the gulf for considerably more money.

Our grandma can beat up your grandma. Mariel is an experienced kayaker who led our armada of kayaks through high waves and strong tides from St. George Island to Little St. George Island. There, we reached an uninhabited, 11 mile paradise of beaches, shells, and southern wilderness. The girls drank in more sunshine and searched for hours to bring home a countless variety of ocean shells washed to the beaches.

Current shore fish targets include flounder, sheepshead and whiting. Heitman and I staked claim with Henske to rocks left in the wake of the building of a channel in the 1950s that now separates St. George and Little St George Islands. Under Henske's guidance and using his equipment, we found two days of extraordinary shore battles.

Henske purchases nickel hooks by the 100 from Rienke's in Milwaukee before departing from southeast Wisconsin; one ounce "football" sinkers that slide above a swivel rig, and dresses the arsenal with several choices of live bait depending on the target. Sheepshead he said, prefer fiddler crabs which we caught by finding their sand holes and catching them in the sun.

"Sheepshead run an average of 16 to 18 inches but will be as big as five to six pounds," Henske said. "They're a barnacle type eater but they are not a roughfish like the sheepshead of Wisconsin are considered. They're very tasty, the top eater fish."

Crappie poles purchased for only about \$15.00 in the south are invaluable tools for conveniently reaching the sheepshead. Made of fiberglass, the rod extends three or four sections with an eye on the end that enables

the angler to reach out over rocks and other likely ambush places.

"It's like a golf ball retriever," Henske said. "It's not made for heavy fish but we put 20 pound test line on a 14 foot rod and send it out there. You get one on, you know it."

Man did we know it. Heitman and I caught our first sheepshead in the first min-

utes on the rocks, and went on to catch or lose about 30 of the black and white striped footballs over the next two days. It was glorious fishing and glorious eating to go along with the shrimp and scallop and other seafood delicacies of the far south. It was, in a word two...St. George Island. *WO*

## Wisconsin Natives are entrepreneurs in Canada, Florida

During our Florida trip, we also visit our friends Dave and Linda Becker, New London natives who were busy preparing their Panama City Beach home in the community of La Valencia for first weekly rental of the year in later April. Dave and Linda were both long-time Kimberly Clark employees before pursuing their real dream 10 years ago by purchasing an Ontario, Canada fishing lodge. Manotak Lodge is a four-star drive-to resort located on Perrault Lake 3-1/2 hours from the Minnesota-Canadian border, boasting trophy walleye, northern pike, smallmouth bass, musky and jumbo perch fishing. The only thing Manotak Lodge was missing was the pure Wisconsin hospitality that the Beckers packed with them.

"But there were a few things still missing in the big picture," Dave Becker said. "Our love of deep-sea fishing, the feel of walking the white sand beaches of Florida and not having to shovel snow. Our Florida adventure of trying to find the right place to live in the winter began. We knew we wanted to be on the Gulf coast side of Florida so we started in northwest Florida and drove down the ocean all the way to Naples. While southern Florida is slightly warmer during the winter, we knew we wanted to be back up in the Panama City Beach area."

The Beckers found their home this winter in La Valencia, a gated community with two community pools, hot tub, tennis court, health center, health center, conference room and private

beach entrance just a 45 second walk from the sugar white beaches and fabulous gulf fishing. Their three-bedroom, three-bath fully-furnished home will also be available for weekly rental from mid-April through mid-October as the hosts tend to their Canadian guests at Manotak Lodge.

"We have met the most interesting people," said Dave, an avid outdoor enthusiast, "and have truly been able to turn a hobby into a fantastic career."

To learn more about the Florida rental home at La Valencia, contact Counts-Oaks Resort Properties at 850-636-6661 or connect with [www.panamabeachrentals.com](http://www.panamabeachrentals.com). Use the address 328 La Valencia or the house name Hakuna Matata ("No Worries") for details. To learn more about a Canadian trip to Manotak Lodge, connect with [www.manotak.com](http://www.manotak.com) or call the Beckers toll free at 1-800-541-3431.

*More outdoors? Connect with us at [www.onwisconsinoutdoors.com](http://www.onwisconsinoutdoors.com). OWO*

